PERGAMON POETS 8

VERNON SCANNELL & JON SILKIN

Selected by Dennis Butts

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PERGAMON POETS VIII

VERNON SCANNELL and JON SILKIN

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by

VERNON SCANNELL

and

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selected by DENNIS BUTTS

PERGAMON PRESS

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Contents

VERNON SCANNELL 1
JON SILKIN 45
Acknowledgements 89

VERNON SCANNELL

BORN: 1922

Poetry

A Mortal Pitch (1957)
The Masks of Love (1960)
A Sense of Danger (1962)
Walking Wounded (1965)
Epithets of War (1969)

Novels

The Fight (1953)
The Wound and the Scar (1953)
The Face of the Enemy (1960)
The Dividing Night (1962)
The Big Time (1965)

Vernon Scannell

Dead Dog	5
Cows in Red Pasture	6
Killing Flies	7
A Case of Murder	8
Psychopath	10
Ruminant	12
The Failure	13
Frankly Speaking	14
Life Story	16
Peerless Jim Driscoll	19
Romantic Suicide	20
The Old Books	22
Progress	23
Six Year Darling	24
Incendiary	25
Schoolroom on a Wet Afternoon	26
Hide and Seek	27
Poem for Jane	28
A Day on the River	29
Autumn	30
Autobiographical Note	32
The Telephone Number	34
Formal Problem	36
Gunpowder Plot	37
The Great War	39
Casualties (from *Epithets of War*)	41
Walking Wounded	43

DEAD DOG

One day I found a lost dog in the street.
The hairs about its grin were spiked with blood,
And it lay as still as stone. It must have been
A little dog, for though I only stood
Nine inches for each of my four years
I picked it up and took it home. My mother
Squealed, and later my father spaded out
A bed and tucked my mongrel down in mud.

I can't remember any feeling but
A moderate pity, cool not lachrymose;
Almost a godlike feeling now it seems.
My lump of dog was ordinary as bread.
I have no recollection of the school
Where I was taught my terror of the dead.

COWS IN RED PASTURE

Last summer in a Kentish field
I saw the plush green darkened by
A whim of light and darkened too
By whiteness of the sheep which stood
Diminished by the distance so
They looked like gravestones on the green,
So still and small and white they seemed.
As this warm memory blurs and fades,
The emptiness bequeathed instructs
Me, curiously, to resurrect
An older memory of a field
Which I would rather far forget:
A foreign field, a field of France,
In which there lay two cows, one white
With maps of black stamped on its hide,
The other just the colour of
The caramel that I once loved.
Both were still; the toffee one
Lay on its back, its stiff legs stuck
Up from the swollen belly like
A huge discarded set of bagpipes.
The piebald cow lay on its side
Looking like any summer beast
Until one saw it had no head.

The grass on which they lay was red.

KILLING FLIES

Compelled by their black hum
And an accidental mischief, I,
Distracted from my pompous play
With words that twist and tease,
Rolled myself a paper club
And stalked my quick tormentors round
The room until they settled on
The wall, their mortuary slab.
Three I translated with one swipe
From busy bodies into dark
Smudges on my wall
Before I knew my action wrong
And guiltily let fall
The paper trancheons and went back
To where my words like insects bled
And dried upon their paper shroud,
All dead, unquestionably dead.

A CASE OF MURDER

They should not have left him there alone,
Alone that is except for the cat.
He was only nine, not old enough
To be left alone in a basement flat,
Alone, that is, except for the cat.
A dog would have been a different thing,
A big gruff dog with slashing jaws,
But a cat with round eyes mad as gold,
Plump as a cushion with tucked-in paws –
Better have left him with a fair-sized rat!
But what they did was leave him with a cat.
He hated that cat; he watched it sit,
A buzzing machine of soft black stuff,
He sat and watched and he hated it,
Snug in its fur, hot blood in a muff,
And its mad gold stare and the way it sat
Crooning dark warmth: he loathed all that.
So he took Daddy's stick and he hit the cat.
Then quick as a sudden crack in glass
It hissed, black flash, to a hiding place
In the dust and dark beneath the couch,
And he followed the grin on his new-made face,
A wide-eyed, frightened snarl of a grin,
And he took the stick and he thrust it in,
Hard and quick in the furry dark.
The black fur squealed and he felt his skin
Prickle with sparks of dry delight.
Then the cat again came into sight,

Shot for the door that wasn't quite shut,
But the boy, quick too, slammed fast the door:
The cat, half-through, was cracked like a nut
And the soft black thud was dumped on the floor.
Then the boy was suddenly terrified
And he bit his knuckles and cried and cried;
But he had to do something with the dead thing there.
His eyes squeezed beads of salty prayer
But the wound of fear gaped wide and raw;
He dared not touch the thing with his hands
So he fetched a spade and shovelled it
And dumped the load of heavy fur
In the spidery cupboard under the stair
Where it's been for years, and though it died
It's grown in that cupboard and its hot low purr
Grows slowly louder year by year:
There'll not be a corner for the boy to hide
When the cupboard swells and all sides split
And the huge black cat pads out of it.

PSYCHOPATH

He has been taken away, most ordinary-looking;
Young, with a baby mouth and fading eyes.
Wearing no collar and tie as if it were Sunday morning,
A cheap blue suit and a look of mild surprise.

You would never have guessed that beneath the anaemic
appearance
A carnivorous creature was caged which, when set free,
Craved outrageous sport and slavering dalliance
With the delicate daughters of people such as we.

To the crowd in the street who gathered to see him hurried
From court to car, steel bracelet on each wrist,
He was simply a villain whose vile scheme had miscarried;
A front-page story to the journalist.

Yet once he was a child, though of course he was never
As sweet and chubby as the darling boy upstairs.
A decent home; how fortunate that his mother
Passed on before this day could frost her hairs.

His father, they say, is a man who loves the Bible,
And did his best to bring his son up well;
Every night they sat at the family table
To contemplate the furniture of Hell.

These facts were known, but only he could have told us
How, at the age of twelve or so, he played
Those visionary games, though not with guns and soldiers:
He dreamed a world where no rules were obeyed,

Which, as the thigh-warm secrets were uncovered,
Breathed quicker with the naked things he'd learnt,
And he roamed animal and no one bothered
For here the lawless were not flayed or burnt.

But at last the niggard world of bread and water,
Disguised as his dream world of wine and cake,
Deceived him utterly: he seized its loveliest daughter,
And then the cold shriek shocked him wide awake.

RUMINANT

The leather belly shades the buttercups.
Her horns are the yellow of old piano keys.
Hopelessly the tail flicks at the humming heat;
Flies crawl to the pools of her eyes.
She turns her head and watches me
As I approach; her gaze is a silent moo.
I stop and we swap stares. I smoke. She chews.

How do I view her then? As pastoral furniture,
Solid in the green and fluid summer?
A brooding factory of milk and sausages,
Or something to be chopped to bits and sold
In wounded paper parcels? No, as none of these.
My view is otherwise and infantile,
But it survives my own sour sneers.
It is the anthropomorphic fallacy
Which puts brown speculation in those eyes.
But I am taken in: that gentleness endears,
As does the massive patience and submission
Huge among buttercups and flies.
But, in the end, it is those plushy eyes,
The slow and meditative jaws that hold
Me to this most untenable of views:
Almost, it seems, she might be contemplating
Composing a long poem about Ted Hughes.

THE FAILURE

His ambition was to be always seen,
Handsome under floodlights or in white,
Graceful on the summer's fluting green;
White flash and crack creating frantic flight
Of ball to boundary like frightened rabbit
His, the hero's wrist and bat must cause;
And he would learn assiduously the habit
Of graciously receiving due applause.

But never did the little boys appear
With anxious albums for his scribbled name,
Nor did the shorthand-typists turn and stare
Enchanted by his beauty and his fame;
And when he threw aside his shabby cloak
Of flesh, no sculptor carved a public tomb;
No one noticed, not even as a joke,
His dusty dying in a furnished room.

FRANKLY SPEAKING: AN INTERVIEW

'Listeners will be interested to hear
This programme where our greatest man of letters
And possibly the greatest man in any
Sphere of intellectual endeavour
Speaks frankly from the wisdom gathered over
A long and varied life. This mellow store
I'm sure will edify and entertain
Without imposing on us too much strain.
We're speaking from the great man's lovely home
And seated in his splendid book-lined room. . . .'

Eight million listeners act their patient role:
They listen. The sharp young voice begins to probe
With confidence, and then the old one comes,
Dusty and frail. One almost smells the mould
Of yellow pages, but no illumination
Brightens bed-sitter, drawing-room and kitchen.
The notions are banal, the phrasing dull;
The stout words with their double chins wheeze out:
The Absolute, the True, the Beautiful.
Then as time wastes, the mouth begins to utter
Dry syllables that flutter like hurt moths.

Determined not to fail, the interviewer
Affects a brisker tone, a little too
Like a policeman's for this interview:
'Now you, sir, as a most exceptional man

Who's pondered long and deep on what goes on
Upon this earth and in the human heart,
Perhaps you'll tell us now what you believe
About the life to come beyond the grave.'

A silence seems to chill the air and threaten
The listener in his armchair or warm kitchen;
And then the great man speaks, quite clearly now:
'Get out! Get out of here, you prying fool!
Let in the white men in their soft black boots
Who come with measuring instruments to prove
I'm no exception to their iron rule.'

LIFE STORY

(*Vitam nemo acciperet si daretur scientibus* – Seneca)

There were no reports of unnatural omens
On the night of his birth; no meteors flavoured
The tasteless and murky broth of night;
Only the usual frugal sprinkling
Of ordinary stars. There was, however,
An announcement in the next issue of the local paper.

His mother considered him extremely beautiful.
His father agreed but was in fact dissembling
For he was greatly disconcerted to discover
That the fruit of his loins showed so little splendour;
Indeed he was forced to admit it resembled,
If any kind of fruit, an aged crab-apple.

The child was christened Herbert after his grandfather
(On his father's side). At the age of three
He was found to be extremely short-sighted
So his amorphous visage was embellished by
An astonishment of lenses and metal frames.
He could read at an impressively early age.

As Herbert pimpled into adolescence
His nature became unnaturally studious;
His aversion to physical exercise was emphatic.
He attended a grammar school and earned a distinction
In algebra (with credits in four other subjects)
And the ambiguous nickname of Plumbum.

At the age of sixteen he joined
A respectable firm of chartered accountants.
His leisure hours were employed in study
Directed by a famous correspondence college,
With a little time put by for relaxation,
His favourite form being the solving of crossword-puzzles.

It was about this time that his father discovered
In Herbert's bedroom a journal entitled
The Need for Nudity, lavishly illustrated,
But after discussing the matter with mother
He said nothing about it. Six years later
Herbert married, not too far beneath him.

Herbert was distressed when the honeymoon
Proved to be made of stale cheese. His bride
Was saddened to find there was no man in it.
They furnished a cosy little nest within
Visiting-reach of mum and dad. Herbert
Passed his final examinations.

Comfortably Herbert began to formulate
A Philosophy of Life: man's mission should be
(He preached) the pursuit of knowledge, comfort
And Decency. We live but once and therefore
Should make the most of it; but never forget
The implacable and vigilant angel of Decency.

It was a pretty good world, he avowed (gazing
At the wallpaper that beautified it), as long as we
Did not expect the impossible. Mankind
Was fundamentally decent, given a chance,
And in these enlightened times all men
Had equal opportunity. The world was warm and cosy.

The world was warm and cosy until one day,
In the seventh year of his marriage, his wife disappeared
On a trip to a honey-sweet moon with a man in it.
Herbert's throat grew pregnant with rage and self-pity
And his eyes gave birth to a salty family.
The world grew cold and was very draughty.

He decided to call on his parents for comfort
And walked into the house unexpectedly.
He found his mum weeping most bitterly,
Moaning a single word over and over:
'Beast!' she moo-ed, 'Oh, Beast!' Herbert learned
That she was referring to his father.

At tea-time a bell rang in the wintry street.
'The muffin-man,' he thought and went to the window.
It wasn't the muffin-man at all but a scabrous leper.
Herbert walked weeping in the gritty night;
He hailed a passing cab to take him home,
But when it stopped he saw it contained a coffin.

Postponing the ride he walked, joining the procession
Of anonymous mourners beneath their black banners.
The silent white ambulances glided by
With their bandaged cargoes of groans. Herbert went home.
On the night of his death there were no unnatural omens
But his passing was mentioned in the national press.

PEERLESS JIM DRISCOLL

I saw Jim Driscoll fight in nineteen ten.
That takes you back a bit. You don't see men
Like Driscoll any more. The breed's died out.
There's no one fit to lace his boots about.
All right, son. Have your laugh. You know it all.
You think these mugs today that cuff and maul
Their way through ten or fifteen threes can fight:
They hardly know their left hand from their right.
But Jim, he knew: he never slapped or swung,
His left hand flickered like a cobra's tongue
And when he followed with the old one-two
Black lightning of those fists would dazzle you.
By Jesus he could hit. I've never seen
A sweeter puncher: every blow as clean
As silver. *Peerless Jim* the papers named him,
And yet he never swaggered, never bragged.
I saw him once when he got properly tagged –
A sucker punch from nowhere on the chin –
And he was hurt; but all he did was grin
And nod as if to say, 'I asked for that.'
No one was ever more worth looking at;
Up there beneath the ache of arc-lamps he
Was just like what we'd love our sons to be
Or like those gods you've heard about at school. . . .
Well, yes, I'm old; and maybe I'm a fool.
I only saw him once outside the ring
And I admit I found it disappointing.
He looked just – I don't know – just ordinary,
And smaller, too, than what I thought he'd be:
An ordinary man in fact, like you or me.

ROMANTIC SUICIDE

He was not wicked, merely wrong,
Always wrong whatever he did,
And when he fell in love the song
He sang was pitched too high and loud
Offending those white ears he loved.
And when she went he bravely hid
His grief and walked into the water,
For that was what the poems he read
Said was the appropriate thing
To do if you had lost your lover.
He did not know the world of rhyme
Has laws outside the world of time
And what is beautiful in verse
May well outside be anything
But beautiful, indeed far worse
Than images whose conscious aim
It is to sicken and alarm.
And so he sank into the lake
And wallowed with the perch and pike
Among green wavering scenery.
Seven days were lost before they hauled
His corpse from lecherous weeds and mud,
And we who gathered there to see
That romantic suicide
Saw a flat inflated blubber,
A thing composed of greyish rubber.
His face we will not dwell upon
Though creatures in the water had

No such pretty scruples there.
Enough to say we turned away,
And what pity might have touched
Our hearts were swamped by nausea.
All we could do was dumbly pray
That God proves less fastidious:
Extend his mercy, sweet and strong,
To one not wicked, merely wrong.

THE OLD BOOKS

They were beautiful, the old books, beautiful I tell you.
You've no idea, you young ones with all those machines;
There's no point in telling you; you wouldn't understand.
You wouldn't know what the word beautiful means.
I remember Mr Archibald – the old man, not his son –
He said to me right out: 'You've got a beautiful hand,
Your books are a pleasure to look at, real works of art.'
You youngsters with your ball-points wouldn't understand.
You should have seen them, my day book, and sales ledger:
The unused lines were always cancelled in red ink.
You wouldn't find better kept books in the City;
But it's no good talking: I know what you all think:
'He's old. He's had it. He's living in the past,
The poor old sod.' Well, I don't want your pity.
My forty-seventh Christmas with the firm. Too much to drink.
You're staring at me, pitying. I can tell by your looks.
You'll never know what it was like, what you've missed.
You'll never know. My God, they were beautiful, the old books.

PROGRESS

Trumpet your triumph roundly,
Twentieth century man,
Such a blast as never was
Since the world began.

Bugle your loud approval
Above the enormous heads
Of iron towers blind in cloud
Where the aviator treads

Air like August's boys in water,
Or with the certainty
That God stepped lively on the waves,
Waltzing buoyantly.

Praise the human canvas daubed,
Bulky with blood and thunder;
Smile on the beefy boys who walk
Backwards with thud and blunder.

SIX YEAR DARLING

The poets are to blame, or partly so:
Wordsworth's pretty pigmy, plump with joy,
And Henry Vaughan's white celestial thoughts
Mislead as much as Millais' chubby boy
Or Daddy-blessing Christopher at prayer.
These fantasies are still quite popular.
Pick up any children's book and you will see
That all the illustrations are as false
As muscle-builders' ads: angelic girls
And sturdy little chaps with candid eyes –
Not to please the children, understand;
You'll find few kids who're kidded by the act,
Though later most of them will take the bribe
And speak of infancy as paradise.
Will this boy, here, be legatee of lies?
Perhaps he will, and maybe just as well
If one day he is going to breed his own.
But now he knows that things are otherwise:
Not paradise, no glimpse of God's bright face,
But time of simple goods like warmth and sweets,
Excitement, too; but often pain and fear,
And worse than either, boredom, long and grey,
A dusty road to nowhere, hard to walk,
Going on and on, desolate and bare,
Until it breaks upon the hidden dark.

INCENDIARY

That one small boy with a face like pallid cheese
And burnt-out little eyes could make a blaze
As brazen, fierce and huge, as red and gold
And zany yellow as the one that spoiled
Three thousand guineas' worth of property
And crops at Godwin's Farm on Saturday
Is frightening – as fact and metaphor:
An ordinary match intended for
The lighting of a pipe or kitchen fire
Misused may set a whole menagerie
Of flame-fanged tigers roaring hungrily.
And frightening, too, that one small boy should set
The sky on fire and choke the stars to heat
Such skinny limbs and such a little heart
Which would have been content with one warm kiss
Had there been anyone to offer this.

SCHOOLROOM ON A WET AFTERNOON

The unrelated paragraphs of morning
Are forgotten now: the severed heads of kings
Rot by the misty Thames; the roses of York
And Lancaster are pressed between the leaves
Of history; negroes sleep in Africa.
The complexities of simple interest lurk
In inkwells and the brittle sticks of chalk:
Afternoon is come and English Grammar.

Rain falls as though the sky has been bereaved,
Stutters its inarticulate grief on glass
Of every lachrymose pane. The children read
Their books or make pretence of concentration,
Each bowed head seems bent in supplication
Or resignation to the fate that waits
In the unmapped forests of the future.
Is it their doomed innocence noon weeps for?

In each diminutive breast a human heart
Pumps out the necessary blood: desires,
Pains and ecstasies surfride each singing wave
Which breaks in darkness on the mental shores.
Each child is disciplined; absorbed and still
At his small desk. Yet lift the lid and see,
Amidst frayed books and pencils, other shapes:
Vicious rope, glaring blade, the gun cocked to kill.

HIDE AND SEEK

Call out. Call loud: 'I'm ready! Come and find me!'
The sacks in the toolshed smell like the seaside.
They'll never find you in this salty dark,
But be careful that your feet aren't sticking out.
Wiser not to risk another shout.
The floor is cold. They'll probably be searching
The bushes near the swing. Whatever happens
You mustn't sneeze when they come prowling in.
And here they are, whispering at the door;
You've never heard them sound so hushed before.
Don't breathe. Don't move. Stay dumb. Hide in your blindness.
They're moving closer, someone stumbles, mutters;
Their words and laughter scuffle, and they're gone.
But don't come out just yet; they'll try the lane
And then the greenhouse and then back here again.
They must be thinking that you're very clever,
Getting more puzzled as they search all over.
It seems a long time since they went away.
Your legs are stiff, the cold bites through your coat;
The dark damp smell of sand moves in your throat.
It's time to let them know that you're the winner.
Push off the sacks. Uncurl and stretch. That's better!
Out of the shed and call to them: 'I've won!
Here I am! Come and own up I've caught you!'
The bushes hold their breath; the sun is gone.
Yes, here you are. But where are they who sought you?

POEM FOR JANE

So many catalogues have been
Compiled by poets, good and bad,
Of qualities that they would wish
To see their infant daughters wear;
Or lacking children they have clad
Other's daughters in the bright
Imagined garments of the flesh,
Prayed for jet or golden hair
Or for the inconspicuous
Homespun of the character
That no-one ever whistles after.
Dear Jane, whatever I may say
I'm sure approving whistles will
Send you like an admiral on
Ships of welcome in a bay
Of tender waters where the fish
Will surface longing to be meshed
Among the treasure of your hair.
And as for other qualities
There's only one I really wish
To see you amply manifest
And that's a deep capacity
For loving; and I long for this
Not for any lucky one
Who chances under your love's sun
But because, without it, you
Would never know completely joy
As I know joy through loving you.

A DAY ON THE RIVER

It moved so slowly, friendly as a dog
Whose teeth would never bite;
It licked the hand with cool and gentle tongue
And seemed to share its parasite's delight
Who moved upon its back or moored among
The hairy shadows overhung
With natural parasols of leaves
And bubbling birdsong.
Ukuleles twanged and ladies sang
In punts and houseboats vivid as our own
Bold paintings of the Ark;
This was summer's self to any child:
The plop and suck of water and the old
Sweet rankness in the air beguiled
With deft archaic spells the dim
Deliberations of the land,
Dear river, comforting
More than the trailing hand.

The afternoon of sandwiches and flasks
Drifted away.
The breeze across the shivering water grew
Perceptibly in strength. The sun began to bleed.
'Time to go home,' the punctured uncles said,
And back on land
We trembled at the river's faint, low growl
And as birds probed the mutilated sky,
The river's teeth grew sharp
And they could bite.

AUTUMN

It is the football season once more
And the back pages of the Sunday papers
Again show the blurred anguish of goalkeepers.

In Maida Vale, Golders Green and Hampstead
Lamps ripen early in the surprising dusk;
They are furred like stale rinds with a fuzz of mist.

The pavements of Kensington are greasy;
The wind smells of burnt porridge in Bayswater,
And the leaves are mushed to silence in the gutter.

The big hotel like an anchored liner
Rides near the park; lit windows hammer the sky.
Like the slow swish of surf the tyres of taxis sigh.

On Ealing Broadway the cinema glows
Warm behind glass while mellow the church clock chimes
As the waiting girls stir in their delicate chains.

Their eyes are polished by the wind,
But the gleam is dull, empty of joy or anger.
Though the lovers are long in coming the girls still linger.

We are nearing the end of the year.
Under the sombre sleeve the blood ticks faster
And in the dark ear of Autumn quick voices whisper.

It is a time of year that's to my taste,
Full of spiced rumours, sharp and velutinous flavours,
Dim with the mist that softens the cruel surfaces,
Makes mirrors vague. It is the mist that I most favour.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Beeston, the place, near Nottingham:
We lived there for three years or so.
Each Saturday at two-o'clock
We queued up for the matinee.
All the kids for streets around
With snotty noses, giant caps,
Cut down coats and heavy boots,
The natural enemies of cops
And schoolteachers. Profane and hoarse
We scrambled, yelled and fought until
The Picture Palace opened up
And we, like Hamelin children, forced
Our bony way into the hall.
That much is easy to recall;
Also the reek of chewing-gum,
Gob-stoppers and liquorice,
But of the flickering myths themselves
Not much remains. The hero was
A milky wide-brimmed hat, a shape
Astride the arched white stallion;
The villain's horse and hat were black.
Disbelief did not exist
And laundered virtue always won
With quicker gun and harder fist,
And all of us applauded it.
Yet I remember moments when
In solitude I'd find myself
Brooding on the sooty man,

The bristling villain who could move
Imagination in a way
The well-shaved hero never could,
And even warm the nervous heart
With something oddly close to love.

THE TELEPHONE NUMBER

Searching for a lost address I find
Among dead papers in a dusty drawer,
A diary which has lain there quite ten years,
And soon forget what I am looking for,
Intrigued by cryptic entries in a hand
Resembling mine but noticeably more
Vigorous than my present quavering scrawl.
Appointments – kept or not, I don't remember –
With people now grown narrow, fat or bald;
A list of books that somehow I have never
Found the time to read, nor ever shall,
Remind me that the world is growing cold.
And then I find a scribbled code and number,
The urgent words: 'Must not forget to call.'
But now, of course, I have no recollection
Of telephoning anyone at all.
The questions whisper: Did I dial that number
And, if I did, what kind of voice replied?
Questions that will never find an answer
Unless – the thought is serpentine – I tried
To telephone again, as years ago
I did, or meant to do. What would I find
If now I lifted this mechanic slave
Black to my ear and spun the dial – so . . . ?
Inhuman, impolite, the double burp
Erupts, insulting hope. The long dark sleeve
Of silence stretched out. No stranger's voice
Slips in, suspicious, cold; no manic speech

Telling what I do not wish to know
Nor throaty message creamed with sensual greed –
Nothing of these. And when again I try,
Doodling foolish in a draughty need,
Relief is tearful when there's no reply.

FORMAL PROBLEM

The poet, in his garden, holds his pen
Like a dart between two fingers and a thumb;
The target is unfortunately blurred;
He does not see as clearly as when young,
Or, rather, doubt and nervousness obtrude:
He dare not risk the unreflecting fling.

How to convey the taste and texture of
This sun-drunk afternoon? How can he sieve
The essence of these greens, the grass, the trees,
The mating scents, the way the clouds behave,
And shape it to a pattern which might please
The glinting intellect and hungry Five?

And how include the aeroplane which slides
No larger than a pearl across the skies,
Its roar wrapped up in a distance which conceals
A figure masked and helmeted whose strong
Finger stabs the button that resolves
The poet's problem in a flash, and bang.

GUNPOWDER PLOT

For days these curious cardboard buds have lain
In brightly coloured boxes. Soon the night
Will come. We pray there'll be no rain
To make these magic orchids flame less bright.

Now in the garden's darkness they begin
To flower: the frenzied whirl of Catherine-wheel
Puts forth its fiery petals and the thin
Rocket soars to burst upon the steel

Bulwark of a cloud. And then the guy,
Absurdly human phoenix, is again
Gulped by greedy flames: the harvest sky
Is flecked with threshed and golden grain.

'Uncle! A cannon! Watch me as I light it!'
The women, helter-skelter, squealing high,
Retreat; the paper fuse is quickly lit,
A cat-like hiss and spit of fire, a sly

Falter, then the air is shocked with blast.
The cannon bangs, and in my nostrils drifts
A bitter scent that brings the lurking past
Lurching to my side. The present shifts,

Allows a ten-year memory to walk
Unhindered now; and so I'm forced to hear
The banshee howl of mortar and the talk
Of men who died; am forced to taste my fear.

I listen for a moment to the guns,
The torn earth's grunts, recalling how I prayed.
The past retreats. I hear a corpse's sons:
'Who's scared of bangers?' 'Uncle! John's afraid!'

THE GREAT WAR

Whenever war is spoken of
I find
The war that was called Great invades the mind:
The grey militia marches over land
A darker mood of grey
Where fractured tree-trunks stand
And shells, exploding, open sudden fans
Of smoke and earth.
Blind murders scythe
The deathscape where the iron brambles writhe;
The sky at night
Is honoured with rosettes of fire,
Flares that define the corpses on the wire
As terror ticks on wrists at zero hour.
These things I see,
But they are only part
Of what it is that slyly probes the heart:
Less vivid images and words excite
The sensuous memory
And, even as I write,
Fear and a kind of love collaborate
To call each simple conscript up
For quick inspection:
Trenches' parapets
Paunchy with sandbags; bandoliers, tin-hats,
Candles in dug-outs,
Duckboards, mud and rats.
Then, like patrols, tunes creep into the mind:

A Long, Long Trail, The Rose of No-Man's Land,
Home Fires and *Tipperary*;
And through the misty keening of a band
Of Scottish pipes the proper names are heard
Like fateful commentary of distant guns:
Paschendale, Bapaume, and Loos, and Mons.
And now,
Whenever the November sky
Quivers with a bugle's hoarse, sweet cry,
The reason darkens; in its evening gleam
Crosses and flares, tormented wire, grey earth
Splattered with crimson flowers,
And I remember
Not the war I fought in
But the one called Great
Which ended in a sepia November
Four years before my birth.

EPITHETS OF WAR

(*iii*) *Casualties*

They were printed daily in the newspapers.
A woman in Nottingham went mad reading them;
She drowned herself in the Trent.
Her name was not included in the Casualty Lists.

She was mother of two million sons.
At night a frail voice would quaver,
Cry from its bed of mud:
'Stretcher-bearers! Stretcher-bearers!' She could not go.

She could not bear it. Her mind broke.
Barbed wire scrawled illiterate history
Over the black dough of Belgian fields.
Was punctuated by anatomies.

In Trafalgar Square an English lady
Distributed white feathers among civilians.
Children with sad moustaches and puttee'd calves
Prepared to be translated.

The crazed mother heard them at night
Crying as hot stars exploded
And the earth's belly shook and rumbled
With giant eructations.

The ambulances lurched through the mire in the brain;
Uniformed surgeons in crimson aprons
Laboured at irreparable bodies;
Dawn bristled on their skullish jaws.

And two million of an innocent generation,
Orphaned by a doomed, demented mother,
Unlearned an axiom: they discovered
Only the lucky few meet death once only.

WALKING WOUNDED

A mammoth morning moved grey flanks and groaned.
In the rusty hedges pale rags of mist hung;
The gruel of mud and leaves in the mauled lane
Smelled sweet, like blood. Birds had died or flown,
Their green and silent attics sprouting now
With branches of leafed steel, hiding round eyes
And ripe grenades ready to drop and burst.
In the ditch at the cross-roads the fallen rider lay
Hugging his dead machine and did not stir
At crunch of mortar, tantrum of a Bren
Answering a Spandau's manic jabber.
Then into sight the ambulances came,
Stumbling and churning past the broken farm,
The amputated sign-post and smashed trees,
Slow wagonloads of bandaged cries, square trucks
That rolled on ominous wheels, vehicles
Made mythopoeic by their mortal freight
And crimson crosses on the dirty white.
This grave procession passed, though, for a while,
The grinding of their engines could be heard,
A dark noise on the pallor of the morning,
Dark as dried blood; and then it faded, died.
The road was empty, but it seemed to wait –
Like a stage which knows the cast is in the wings –
Wait for a different traffic to appear.
The mist still hung in snags from dripping thorns;
Absent-minded guns still sighed and thumped.
And then they came, the walking wounded,

Straggling the road like convicts loosely chained,
Dragging at ankles' exhaustion and despair.
Their heads were weighted down by last night's lead,
And eyes still drank the dark. They trailed the night
Along the morning road. Some limped on sticks;
Others wore rough dressings, splints and slings;
A few had turbanned heads, the dirty cloth
Brown-badged with blood. A humble brotherhood,
Not one was suffering from a lethal hurt,
They were not magnified by noble wounds,
There was no splendour in that company.
And yet, remembering after eighteen years,
In the heart's throat a sour sadness stirs;
Imagination pauses and returns
To see them walking still, but multiplied
In thousands now. And when heroic corpses
Turn slowly in their decorated sleep
And every ambulance has disappeared
The walking wounded still trudge down that lane,
And when recalled they must bear arms again.

JON SILKIN

BORN: 1930

The Peaceable Kingdom (1954)
The Two Freedoms (1958)
The Re-Ordering of the Stones (1961)
Nature With Man (1965)
Poems New and Selected (1966)

Jon Silkin

Carved	49
A Death to Us	50
The Cunning of an Age	51
A Space in the Air	54
Caring for Animals	57
Death of a Bird	58
Baited	60
Hunger	62
Bowl	63
Death of a Son	64
The Child	66
The Strawberry Plant	69
A Bluebell	70
Daisy	71
Dandelion	73
Moss	74
Culpabilities	76
The Coldness	78
Savings	80
Defence	82
The Wall	85
Meetings	86
Epilogue	88

CARVED

Two small dogs stood by a dead black bird
And the black bird was very dead.

The two dogs stood by the bird like large lions
But they never touched the dead thing, once.

They would like to have eaten the black thing
But it was very dead with red ants,

Sawing its neck away like stone masons
And the red ants were very much alive.

So all the time the dogs stood they barked there
Because they couldn't eat the black thing.

Something large about that black bird.
It was being eaten by red death

While the two large-lion small dogs just stood,
Barking: they never touched the black thing,

And the black thing never looked at them, once.
It was indifferent to two small dogs.

Maybe it did not hear those large lions
Or maybe the black bird felt sorry for the small dogs.

Meanwhile the dead went on being dead and the living living.

A DEATH TO US

A tiny fly fell down on my page
Shivered, lay down, and died on my page.

I threw his body onto the floor
That had laid its frail life next to mine.

His death then became an intrusion on
My action; he claimed himself as my victim.

His speck of body accused me there
Without an action, of his small brown death.

And I think now as I barely perceive him
That his purpose became in dying, a demand

For a murderer of his casual body.
So I must give his life a meaning

So I must carry his death about me
Like a large fly, like a large frail purpose.

THE CUNNING OF AN AGE

The fox sat under the hill.
And all around him the day was springing the earth
Curved away in a style he knew to be home;
The year grew round him like a love, the birds
Cried down the wind.

And the air hummed with growing.
He smelt the humble plants at the foot of the hill.
The grass was bleeding like love and the insects stirred
In the air at ease with themselves. The black wind streamed
Over the top of the hill.

Only here had he made a home.
The ways of the world had stopped short of this bulge
On the surface of things because . . . because it had other
Things to do. And the fox sat under the hill
And all lay still.

Yet as he lay there wondering
How rivers came to be especially
His one at the edge of the world his world, a spot
Of red spat up at his eyes, no more, and was gone
In a twist of vision. No more than that

To the fox who sat under the hill.
The air was the same the year went round just the same
The insects turned around in their aimless journeys.
But just that red at the foot of the hill below
The stream had changed things.

Had changed his home
To a starting place, and below came the horn's winding
Warning halloo and up he was and smartly
Away as the red shot up to his horizon
And his mind's horizon.

And he was away.
No listening or waiting for the will and lust
Of the world but to live and lick his life
From the corners of a world that would hold him easily
Peacefully was his will,

Under a hill of maiden-hair
And grass as green as blood and summer-time
To sweat in his fur and his ways. He was off to save
His life. The hounds were baying the other side
Of the hill. And

He thought as he ran with his name
Of the names he'd been told and the games he'd been called,
but the horn
Whirled round in his head and the hounds fell on
In the leaps that distance and time pulls on one, the tricks
The mind pulls on one.

And the wind changed his name
To FOLLOWED from Fox-on-the-hill
And the wind followed, curling his brush. And the hounds
followed too,
Like dreams like death on the hill like birds like grass
Like anything but not

Like fox he was
Or fox he knew and the horn curled round in his head
Slipping over the hill and into his head. But here

He swerved and hid. And the hounds went hurling past
With blood before

Their eyes, and the men and the world
With blood over their hands and a curse on their whips
And a horse on their world and a horn on their minds
Went for a day
Over and down the hill.

A SPACE IN THE AIR

The first day he had gone
I barely missed him. I was almost glad he had left
Without a bark or flick of his tail,
I was content he had slipped

Out into the world. I felt,
Without remarking, it was nearly a relief
From his dirty habits. Then, the second
Day I noticed the space

He left behind him. A hole
Cut out of the air. And I missed him suddenly,
Missed him almost without knowing
Why it was so. And I grew

Afraid he was dead, expecting death
As something I had grown used to. I was afraid
The clumsy children in the street
Had cut his tail off as

A souvenir of the living and
I did not know what to do. I was fearing
Somebody had hurt him. I called his name
But the hole in the air remained.

I have grown accustomed to death
Lately. But his absence made me sad,
I do not know how he should do it
But his absence frightened me.

It was not only his death I feared,
Not only his but as if all of those
I loved, as if all of those near me
Should suddenly go

Into the hole in the light
And disappear. As if all of them should go
Without barking, without speaking,
Without noticing me there

But go; and going as if
The instruments of pain were a casual thing
To suffer, as if they would suffer so,
Casually and without greatness,

Without purpose even. But just go.
I should be afraid to lose all those friends like this.
I should fear to lose those loves. But mostly
I should fear to lose you.

If you should go
Without affliction, but even so, I should fear
The rent you would make in the air
And the bare howling

Streaming after your naked hair.
I should feel your going down more than my going
down.
My own death I bear every day
More or less

But your death would be something else,
Something else beyond me. It would not be
Your death or my death, love,
But our rose-linked dissolution.

So I feared his going,
His death, not our death, but a hint at our death. And
I shall always fear
The death of those we love as
The hint of your death, love.

CARING FOR ANIMALS

I ask sometimes why these small animals
With bitter eyes, why we should care for them.

I question the sky, the serene blue water,
But it cannot say. It gives no answer.

And no answer releases into my head
A procession of grey shades patched and whimpering,

Dogs with clipped ears, wheezing cart horses
A fly without shadow and without thought.

Is it with these menaces to our vision
With this procession led by a man carrying wood

We must be concerned? The holy land, the rearing
Green island should be kindlier than this.

Yet the animals, our ghosts, need tending to.
Take in the whipped cat and the blinded owl;

Take up the man-trapped squirrel upon your shoulder.
Attend to the unnecessary beasts.

From growing mercy and a moderate love
Great love for the human animal occurs.

And your love grows. Your great love grows and grows.

DEATH OF A BIRD

After those first days
When we had placed him in his iron cage
And made a space for him
From such

Outrageous cage of wire,
Long and shallow, where the sunlight fell
Through the air, onto him;
After

He had been fed for three days
Suddenly, in that sunlight before noon
He was dead with no
Pretence.

He did not say goodbye
He did not say thankyou, but he died then
Lying flat on the rigid
Wires

Of his cage, his gold
Beak shut, which once in hunger had
Opened as a trap
And then

Swiftly closed again,
Swallowing quickly what I had given him;
How can I say I am sorry
He died.

Seeing him lie there dead,
Death's friend with death, I was angry he
Had gone without pretext or warning,
With no

Suggestion first he should go,
Since I had fed him, then put wires round him
Bade him hop across
The bars of my hands.

I asked him only that
He should desire his life. He had become
Of us a black friend with
A gold mouth

Shrilly singing through
The heat. The labour of the black bird! I
Cannot understand why
He is dead.

I bury him familiarly.
His heritage is a small brown garden.
Something is added to the everlasting earth;
From my mind a space is taken away.

BAITED

On the still bank I shake
My intense line of chosen fly into
The stream where change is flowed
Into deep change, and tempt the casual fish.
But who is the bait and who
In that lilting procession, fish or man?

Casually reflected image
Fish or fisherman, that heaving minute
Changes my life away.
Life as sensation baits me to grasp the fish.
I cast into the stream
And take my chosen bride into my arms.

Never shall I within
That crystal water net so brilliant
Or coloured a dancing fish
As I bestride her. I make the minute yield
Only a meadow's breath
Green, green intangible, breath through my life.

Gentle as a new bride
The baited fish leaps to my line. I pull
Its fretting body out of
The unguent water wriggling with breath;
I lay that fish onto
The meadow where my girl lies, netted in

Green, green, o a green breath.
It is his death. He lies still through that stroke
Of my mounted hand upon
His quivering neck, struck, and lies stilled upon
My red, huge hand;
And such a fish for such a stroke as this.

Casually reflected image
Fish or fisherman, I hurl that creature
Back into the stream.
Its life, small as a pool of soft blood in
The hunter's hand it was
Not worth the tremor of my hand to kill.

As this death hooks our flesh,
He puts his subtle hooks into our flesh
Baited with tiny flies
And nets our lives away. Death is that dead
Creature's unworthy kiss;
We are death's fish as we are death to fish.

HUNGER

A woman goes to feed her friends each day.
She moves slowly, she stoops, and in her hand

Is the offering of bread which she hurls with all her love
At the large sparrows, she attacks them with it, but they

Only leap at her as she strides outside her house.
For they know by her carriage and her stooping pride

She is of them. She is full of hunger for
The hand that bears the profound gift of love.

But like them she is inarticulate
She nods and pecks when she would give her heart.

Her body stoops but the straight spirit burns
And while she is dying the black sky watches her.

BOWL

The beggar's bowl is formed from hands.
Hunger keeps them there, rigid; inside
Crouches a blessing from the sun;
Below; the dried bones of starvation.

No milk; and no wine.
You, into this gnarled hand put
Bread, and drop meat; raw,
Boned and moist, but donate no pity.

DEATH OF A SON

(who died in a mental hospital aged one)

Something has ceased to come along with me.
Something like a person: something very like one.
And there was no nobility in it
Or anything like that.

Something was there like a one year
Old house, dumb as stone. While the near buildings
Sang like birds and laughed
Understanding the pact

They were to have with silence. But he
Neither sang nor laughed. He did not bless silence
Like bread, with words.
He did not forsake silence.

But rather, like a house in mourning
Kept the eye turned in to watch the silence while
The other houses like birds
Sang around him.

And the breathing silence neither
Moved nor was still.

I have seen stones: I have seen brick
But this house was made up of neither brick nor stone
But a house of flesh and blood
With flesh of stone

And bricks for blood. A house
Of stones and blood in breathing silence with the other
Birds singing crazy on its chimneys.
But this was silence,

This was something else, this was
Hearing and speaking though he was a house drawn
Into silence, this was
Something religious in his silence,

Something shining in his quiet,
This was different this was altogether something else:
Though he never spoke, this
Was something to do with death.

And then slowly the eye stopped looking
Inward. The silence rose and became still.
The look turned to the outer space and stopped,
With the birds still shrilling around him.
And as if he could speak

He turned over on his side with his one year
Red as a wound
He turned over as if he could be sorry for this
And out of his eyes two great tears rolled, like stones,
and he died.

THE CHILD

Something that can be heard
Is a grasping of soft fingers
Behind that door.
Oh come in, please come in
And be seated.

It was hard to be sure,
Because for some time a creature
Had bitten at the wood.
But this was something else; a pure noise
Humanly shaped

That gently insists upon
Being present. I am sure you are.
Look: the pots over the fire
On a shelf, just put;
So, and no other way,

Are as you have seen them; and you,
Being visible, make them no different.
No man nor thing shall take
Your place from you; so little,
You would think, to ask for.

I have not denied; you know that.
Do you? Do you see
How you are guttered
At a breath, a flicker from me?
Burn more then.

Move this way with me,
Over the stone. Here are
Your father's utensils on
The kitchen wall; cling
As I lead you.

It seems you have come without speech,
And flesh. If it be love
That moves with smallness through
These rooms, speak to me,
As you move.

You have not come with
Me, but burn on the stone.

If I could pick you up
If I could lift you;
Can a thing be weightless?
I have seen, when I did lift you

How your flesh was casually
Pressed in. You have come
Without bone, or blood.
Is that to be preferred?
A flesh without

Sinew, a bone that has
No hardness, and will not snap.
Hair with no spring; without
Juices, touching, or speech.
What are you?

Or rather, show me, since
You cannot speak, that you are real;
A proper effusion of air,
Not that I doubt, blown by a breath
Into my child;

As if you might grow on that vapour
To thought, or natural movement
That expresses, 'I know where I am.'
Yet that you are here,
I feel.

Though you are different.
The brain being touched lightly,
It was gone. Yet since you live,
As if you were not born,
Strangeness of strangeness, speak.

Or rather, touch my breath
With your breath, steadily
And breathe yourself into me.

The soft huge pulsing comes
And passes through my flesh
Out of my hearing.

THE STRAWBERRY PLANT

The rootless strawberry plant
Moves across the soil. It hops
Six inches. Has no single location,
Or root.
You cannot point to its origin,
Or parent. It shoots out
A pipe, and one more plant
Consolidates its ground.
It puts out crude petals, loosely met.
As if the business of flowering
Were to be got over. Their period is brief.
Even then, the fruit is green,
Swart, hairy. Its petals invite tearing
And are gone quickly,
As if they had been. The fruit swells,
Reddens, becomes succulent.
Propagation through the devouring
Appetite of another.
Is sweet, seeded, untruculent;
Slugs like it, all over.
It is nubile to the lips,
And survives even them. And teeth,
Insane with edible fury,
Of the loving kind.

A BLUEBELL

Most of them in the first tryings
Of nature, hang at angles,
Like lamps. These though
Look round, like young birds,
Poised on their stems. Closer,
In all their sweetness, malevolent. For there is
In the closed, blue flower, gas-coloured,
A seed-like dark green eye.
Carraway, grained, supple,
And watching; it is always there,
Fibrous, alerted,
Coarse grained enough to print
Out all your false delight
In 'sweet nature'. This is struggle.
The beetle exudes rot: the bee
Grapples the reluctant nectar
Coy, suppurating, and unresigned.
Buds print the human passion
Pure now not still immersed
In fighting wire worms.

DAISY

Look unoriginal
Being numerous. They ask for attention
With that gradated yellow swelling
Of oily stamens. Petals focus them:
The eye-lashes grow wide.
Why should not one bring these to a funeral?
And at night, like children,
Without anxiety, their consciousness
Shut with white petals.

Blithe, individual.

The unwearying, small sunflower
Fills the grass
With versions of one eye.
A strength in the full look
Candid, solid, glad.
Domestic as milk.

In multitudes, wait,
Each to be looked at, spoken to.
They do not wither;
Their going, a pressure
Of elate sympathy
Released from you.
Rich up to the last interval
With minute tubes of oil, pollen;

Utterly without scent, for the eye,
For the eye, simply. For the mind
And its invisible organ,
That feeling thing.

DANDELION

Slugs nestle where the stem
Broken, bleeds milk.
The flower is eyeless: the sight is compelled
By small, coarse, sharp petals,
Like metal shreds. Formed,
They puncture, irregularly perforate
Their yellow, brutal glare.
And certainly want to
Devour the earth. With an ample movement
They are a foot high, as you look.
And coming back they take hold
On pert domestic strains.
Others' lives are theirs. Between them
And domesticity,
Grass. They infest its weak land;
Fatten, hide slugs, infestate.
They look like plates; more closely
Like the first tryings, the machines, of nature
Riveted into her, successful.

MOSS

'Patents' will burn it out; it would lie there
Turning white. It shelters on the soil; quilts it.
So persons lie over it; but look closely:
The thick, short green threads quiver like an animal
As a fungoid quivers between that and vegetable:
A mushroom's flesh with the texture and consistency of a kidney.

Moss is soft as a pouch.
There are too many shoots though, boxed compacted,
Yet nestling together,
Softly luminous.
They squirm minutely. The less compact kind
Has struggling white flowers; closed,
Like a minute bell's clapper;
So minute that opened then, its stretch seems wide.
The first grows in damper places.
With what does it propagate?
Quiet, of course, it adheres to
The cracks of waste-pipes, velvets,
Velours them; and enriching
Unnatural ruff swathing the urban 'manifestation:'
The urban nature is basemented, semi-dark;
It musts, it is alone.

Here moss cools; it has no children;
It amplifies itself.
Could that over-knit fiction of stubbed threads reproduce
Defined creatures?

It hovers tentatively between one life and another,
Being the closed-road of plants,
Its mule; spreads only its kind –
A soft stone. It is not mad.
Reared on the creeping dankness of earth
It overspreads, smears, begrudges something
Though it is passive; spreads wildly.
It is immune to nothing;
You cannot speak of misery to it.

CULPABILITIES

It is a matter of opinion
Who killed Hitler. But my belief
Is that he was quietly assassinated
At night, by many men,
Rather in the same way
I mean, without much noise
And over a period, but still,
As the six million Jews died
At the instigation of those
European guards
Whose desire to procreate
Changed into a labyrinth of cruelties,
Assisted plentifully
As always, and on this occasion
By miscellaneous
Poles, Magyars, Ukrainians,
Though this time not the queer English,
The exemplary Danes, nor the small
Pathologically heroic Netherlands.
So who can blame the Nazis?
They merely inherited
A European illness,
Embarrassed beyond morals,
Beating the flesh until
The rods, keenly stirred
Begged more. And that mystery
European nearly
Remains virgin of solution

As much, indeed, as society's
Ills pursed on a sick wind,
Rotting it, making a liquid
Of the poor body.

THE COLDNESS

Where the printing-works buttress a church
And the northern river like moss
Robes herself slowly through
The cold township of York,
More slowly than usual
For a cold, northern river,
You see the citizens
Indulging stately pleasures,
Like swans. But they seem cold.
Why have they been so punished:
In what do their sins consist now?
An assertion persistent
As a gross tumour, and the sense
Of such growth haunting
The flesh of York
Is that there has been
No synagogue since eleven ninety
When eight hundred Jews
Took each other's lives
To escape christian death
By christian hands; and the last
Took his own. The event
Has the frigid persistence of a growth
In the flesh. It is a fact
No other fact can be added to
Save that it was Easter, the time
When the dead christian God
Rose again. It is in this,
Perhaps, they are haunted; for the cold

Blood of victims is colder,
More staining, more corrosive
On the soul, than the blood of martyrs.
What consciousness is there of the cold
Heart, with its spaces?
For nothing penetrates
More than admitted absence.
The heart in warmth, even, cannot
Close its gaps. Absence of Jews
Through hatred, or indifference,
A gap they slip through, a conscience
That corrodes more deeply since it is
Forgotten – this deadens York.
Where are the stone-masons, the builders
Skilled in glass, strong first in wood;
Taut, flaxen plumbers with lengths of pipe,
Steel rules coiled in their palms;
The printers; canopy-makers –
Makers in the institution of marriage?
Their absence is endless, a socket
Where the jaw is protected neitoer
Through its tolerance for tooth,
Nor for blood. Either there is pain or no pain.
If they could feel; were there one
Among them with this kind
Of sensitivity that
Could touch the dignity,
Masonry of the cold
Northern face that falls
As you touch it, there might
Be some moving to
A northern expurgation.
All Europe is touched
With some of frigid York,
As York is now by Europe.

SAVINGS

I see the government
Is suggesting that some
Of us save money. A woman
Sitting at table with
A pen on her lips,
By her side the snap
Of her fiancé, writes
A letter: 'if we both save
We may have what we want
In a few years.' The order
For torturing wires and straps
A man and wife may use
Is already placed.
Meanwhile parliament debases
Such foul coinage
As these two save
On massive armaments.

I want a small clock;
I want a bed, a wardrobe
To hang my trousers in;
Also à kitchen in
Repair, for I want food.
But let me stay my soul
A little clean of her,
With something of the compassion
A strong woman has
Decently gentle. Death infinitely

Comes close when we are old:
Death of the soul is like
A pan of boiling milk,
The heat thieves it away
And something of the man
That might live after death
Precedes his flesh into
The soil in particles
Not smaller than dejection.
We are born part of the way
Death goes; but I pray the angelic forms
Help me to stay that bit
Until I die.

DEFENCE

(for Ann)

What 'one-in-five' can do
No man can quite do

She arrived late, with this motto:
'Time used in reconnaissance
Is not time lost.' Useful hint
On how efficient our defences
Would be. Sent from the *Home Office*
On 'Work of some importance'.
And 'The first thing,' she said
'Is that there will be four minutes
Of preparation before
The thing is dropped. You should
Instruct persons to stand
In the centre of what room
They like – for the blast,
Unlike the bombs of the previous war,
Will draw the walls out.
There will be no crushing
Of flesh. Instead
On all sides walls will reveal
The citizen unharmed.' Here a question,
But 'No' she said 'we have
From our *Intelligence*
Absolute assurance
Our capital is not targeted.'
Total warfare, by arrangement.
And she was sure, when pressed.

'But there will be devastation
As we now suspect, in radius
Of forty four miles.
The water will be infected;
The light from the thing, astonishing;
Which, though surprised by, we should
Not look at; but shelter
Behind some object "to reduce
Damage to the tissue"
From radiation; or shelter
Under brown paper;
Or, if you can, –
Sheets soaked in urine.'

So women who crotchet, stop that;
Men labouring whose issue is
The two-handed house, set that aside.
Girls big and delicate
With child, turn on your side;
You will melt. The ravelling spider
And the scorpion whose prongs itch
Will fuse in a viscoid
Tar, black as a huge fly.
The whole of nature
Is a preying upon.
Let man, whose mind is large,
Legislate for
All passionate things,
All sensate things: the sensuous
Grass, whose speech is all
In its sharp, bending blade.
Leave not a leaf, a stone
That rested on the dead
To its own dissolution.

She left then,
As if she were with her feet
Turning an enormous,
If man-made, pearl
As means of locomotion.

THE WALL

Living as though a wall
Had been raised between
Each of us; we would speak
With the other of those spaces
Of earth we call him to.
Yet by compulsion, we share
These stones. At which some men
Would call this a failure
In communication. The fact is
Not Babel, but mutual despair
Separates us, since each
Through love, detachment, or exhaustion
Is himself alone, though each one,
By nature, lacks what the other has.
The walls remain. They are
A possession no man surrenders
But he perishes. And in his loneness
He beats on the barriers.
It is the agony
Which seems supreme, as stone
Triumphs in what it is
Though its manipulators
Give it whatever form
The conscious use demands,
For man is agony.

MEETINGS

I walked from the town in
Mid-morning, by path that
Pierced the exhaustion of wheat.
Stone and glass lowered beneath
What I climbed. Its blue haze
Gave out, and the path sharply
Cut into blackish earth. Trees began,
Raising branches, their leaves
Touched with stiffness, hale though.
One with thicker leaf and trunk
Grew separately. I could not
See man at the back.
Another, I had not seen,
Turned through the gate before
Me, moving the iron through
Its railed arc, and he left
His hand clasped over the top
Bar as he moved it on.
  It was not gentleness
Nor age, entirely.
And after he was through
He pushed the quartered metal
Back on its arc, which shook.
I might have stopped, a pause
Of courtesy for age
But did not, and nearing him
He seemed to have forced his
Stooped walk to my side quicker
Than I to his.

'This is the way into
The town.' 'Yes' I answered.
The question seemed to shake
His flesh; as if the voice
Of intellect were firm
Even in shrunk frame; smiling slightly,
As if the thought of his
Expended shape contracted
Mine in his. I asked
If he had eaten. 'Yes'
He said, crossing
His hands across his stomach to harden
His curved shape. Some earned
Hoard of thought nourished him.
'Across that field my strength dwindled.
I took from the earth my frame's
Energy, tended one, with the other's.
I am this now.' I noticed then
His eyelids were too small
To cover the stiffened muscular
Sight. Came close to me,
Lifting his face to mine,
Elaborately spat onto
My mouth a thin milkiness.
I would have hit him.
Some self-tenderness in
His body prevented me.
He slowly moved on top of
Grass trodden into earth.
From that tree he passed
I heard a core of voices
Casually bent
On profitless violence.

EPILOGUE

All the people in my poems walk into the dark
All the animals walk up to the ark.
The people are deaf and limping like flies
Cunning shining soft sad they walk,
And they do not know but they walk into the bad dark.

All the animals in my poems walk into the sun
Blinking their eyes and licking their paws they go,
On and on up the proud procession of stairs
Up the proud straight stairs like a holy circus
And they do not know but they walk in the great light.

If all the people and all the animals
Joined dark with light, if all the proud people
And soft-stepping circus climbed their way in the dark
Walked with the black seals and walked with the spidery flies
They would all go into the great light, and they would know.

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